

# Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

## What Is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B infection, also known as serum hepatitis, is a dangerous but preventable infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus.

In North America, hepatitis B occurs mostly in adolescents and young adults, although anyone can become infected. The infection is usually silent, without any apparent symptoms for many years. One of the most serious complications of hepatitis B is liver cancer or irreparable liver damage or failure. In general, the earlier in life one is infected, the higher the chances that these complications develop. Not all people with the infection will be sick or have any symptoms and they are referred to as hepatitis B carriers. Although not apparently ill, carriers may unknowingly transmit the virus to other people. The only way to know if you are a carrier is by a blood test.

Hepatitis B can be transmitted by coming into contact with an infected person's blood or body fluids. Modes of transmission of hepatitis B include being passed from the mother to a baby at birth and living in the same household with someone who is infected, including a carrier. The virus can also be transmitted through unprotected sexual intercourse, or through contact with infected blood such as drug users or others who share dirty tattoo or ear/body piercing needles, and by sharing toothbrushes or razors.

As there is no cure for hepatitis B infection, prevention is extremely important. Thanks to the hepatitis B vaccine, over 95% of vaccinated children are protected from the infection. Hepatitis B vaccination is currently part of the regular immunization schedule in North America. The vaccination consists of 2 or 3 doses. All doses should be given for maximal protection. In order to protect children and adolescents who have not previously received the vaccination, hepatitis B vaccine is recommended at age 10 to 12. Older adolescents or others living with an infected household member should also receive the vaccination series.

Aside from hepatitis B vaccination (which is considered to be among the safest available), another important aspect of prevention focuses on avoiding contact with infected blood, by knowing and avoiding potentially "high risk" behaviours. Using condoms during sexual intercourse and not sharing needles, razors or toothbrushes can all help prevent the spread of the virus. Pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B because if they are infected, immediate action can be taken at birth to protect their newborn baby.

Finally, be aware that you are at a higher risk when travelling to China and some parts of Asia and Africa where the incidence of hepatitis B is higher than in North America.

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